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SUBJECT: IRAQI REACTIONS TO AMB.CROCKER, GEN PETRAEUS
TESTIMONY

Classified By: Political Counselor Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Preliminary reactions to the Ambassador's September 10 testimony, and that of General Petraeus, to the House Armed Services and International Relations Committees have been quite positive across Iraq's major sectarian communities and in various parts of Baghdad. Most educated Iraqis seem to be following the Congressional testimony intently, with political observers trying to read between the lines for U.S. views on Prime Minister Maliki. With the notable exception of the Sadrists, most observers acknowledged the testimony's credibility and expressed relief that neither the Ambassador nor the CG had advocated a precipitous withdrawal of Coalition Forces. The following reactions, though not a scientific sampling, convey the flavor of what we have been hearing today. End summary.

Shi,a Reaction

¶2. (C) In a live appearance on al-Arabiya on Sept. 11, Iraqi National Security Advisor Muafaq al-Rubaiee conveyed the "official" Iraqi response to the joint testimonies by summarizing the GOI's achievements in the political, economic and security fields. He did not directly comment on the testimony itself.

¶3. (C) Sheik Abdel Halim Zuheiri, one of PM Maliki's closest advisors, expressed delight with yesterday's testimony. He said the only surprise was that the criticisms from the House Democrats were not as vociferous as he had expected. Zuheiri noted wryly that even Sunni firebrand Khalaf al-Alyan had been relatively circumspect, although he added that PM Maliki could not win with the Sunnis: if the benchmarks report made Maliki look good, then the Sunnis would dismiss him as an American puppet, and if the report made him look bad, then the Sunnis would use it to attack Maliki's credibility. Zuheiri likewise saw a Sunni double-standard with regard to the CG's proposal to wind down the surge (a proposal Zuheiri endorsed): the Sunnis continued to insist on the legitimacy of attacks against Coalition Forces, but at the same time wanted the U.S. forces to stay in order to protect them against the Shi,a. Zuheiri predicted that once the impact of the benchmarks report/testimony sank in and it became clear that there would be no abrupt reversal of USG policy, the Sunnis would become more pragmatic in dealing with the GOI.

¶4. (C) Dr. Abdul-Hadi Al-Hassani, CoR Member (Da,wa Tanzim) saw the testimony as "more positive than negative" and was pleased by the CG's proposal to wind down the surge by summer 2008, which he called "a positive indication showing that security is getting better." He noted that, based on interactions he had late last night with PM Maliki and CoR Deputy Speaker Khalid Atiyya, that both of them seemed pleased with the testimony as well (NB - Atiyya later told the press that the joint report was "positive in general, and

included the most important obstacles which face the national unity government in its march to achieve national reconciliation." Al-Hassani suggested, however, that the climate for political reconciliation remained difficult.

¶15. (C) Najaf cleric Sayyid Abu Jaffar al-Isawi said the testimony's conflicting assessments of PM Maliki's government -- praise of its efforts and sincerity but criticism of its poor results -- would boost both Maliki supporters and opponents. He will be watching the President's Sept. 13 speech for indications of USG views on Maliki's fate as PM. He said average Iraqis, particularly Shi'ites, are paying more attention to a recent television interview with Ayad Allawi in which he claimed to have brokered a recent meeting between "the Americans" and former Ba'ath strongman Izzet al-Durri outside of Iraq. He opined that news of that meeting, coupled with the recent USG focus on Anbar and Sunni tribes, has increased suspicion in some Shi'a circles of a pro-Sunni tilt by the USG. VP Abdel Mehdi's advisor Fareed Yasseen told us the testimony "hit all the right notes" and said that the most important reaction is not from Iraqis, but from the American people.

¶16. (SBU) In comments to the press, Sadrist CoR member Asma' al-Musawi belittled the report's importance and said it contained nothing new. She said that Iraqis, rather than the American army, deserve the credit for the success of the Anbari tribes against Al-Qaeda.

Kurdish Reactions

¶17. (C) UK Emb Poloff told us that President Jalal Talabani and DPM Barham Salih, who watched the testimony in its entirety while dining last night with the UK Ambassador, were generally pleased with both tone and content. The UK Embassy

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noted the absence of any strong condemnation of PM Maliki by the Ambassador or the CG, predicting that this stance would keep the Maliki government in place for the time being, and make the Sunni bloc adjust its political tack toward more cooperative engagement.

¶18. (C) Eight Kurdish guards outside of the parliament: "We started watching it but then someone changed the channel. What did they say? Did they say anything about the Maliki government? They need to focus on the last 35 years, not just the last four years."

Sunni Reaction

¶19. (C) VP Hashimi's Chief of Staff said that the Ambassador and Gen. Petraeus played their remarks regarding Maliki nicely, allowing the Congressmen to criticize the PM and leaving themselves flexibility in continuing the Administration's relationship with him. In any case, Hashimi/Tawafuq is not interested in removing Maliki the person, but rather in fixing the unbalanced and ineffective government he runs. He said "many of us were disappointed" that the remarks did not contain a vision of a new framework for fixing the above problem.

¶10. (C) Dr. Salim al-Jabbouri (Tawafuq, vice-chair of the CoR Legal Committee): "There was a difference between the two speeches, Gen. Petraeus was focused on technical data, Amb. Crocker gave a more general and descriptive report and focused on specific historical points. This is good, because Iraqi politicians understand that they must determine the specific details of any political settlement. Their reports were not depressing and were realistic. The most dangerous thing would be a sudden withdrawal of U.S. forces, not only because of the impact on the security situation, but also because it would disappoint Sunnis who have invested in the political process. The situation is very different than a year ago, before Sunnis thought joining the ISF was a source of shame, but now they will not let armed groups enter their

communities because they know they will bring sectarian ideas and insecurity."

Man on the Street Reaction in Baghdad

¶11. (C) Hassan from the Karkh district: "I feel comfortable because your troops are staying for up to one year. I am happy because they will stay. I was worried they might leave. If they stay, things can get better here. Security is already improving. If the troops leave, the gap will be filled by militias or other countries in the region. I was surprised by the sharp statement against Maliki by the Congressman with the white hair (presumably Rep. Lantos). It surprised me that an American official said in public that Maliki is full of lies, and not doing his job. Many people here agree with this, but we don't think it should lead to the withdrawal of U.S. troops. People are angry that you continue to support Maliki without forcing him to change his approach."

¶12. (C) Zedan from Sadr City: "Everyone is grateful for what they said. people followed what they said with interest and became happy because it's true. It reflects the real circumstances in Iraq right now. They confirmed that U.S. troops will stay and will leave gradually, not suddenly. Most people are comfortable with their report because it was not a political but a factual report."

¶13. (C) Sinan from 9 Nissan district: "I had no power to watch the report. Most people didn't hear it because they have not electricity -- most people read about it. I read about it on the internet today at work . . . Your troops have helped already -- the streets are now more secure, with , with fewer car bombs, and less sectarian killing . . . when the security situation is better, then it will be good to remove your troops."

¶14. (C) Saif from 9 Nissan district. "It was a very good report. I watched it on TV and read it on the internet. It will benefit the Iraqi government. Many things they said were realistic and objective."

¶15. (C) Mais from Mansour district: "They dealt with very important things for us. They mentioned foreign fighters and electricity conditions. They said we can't work because of electricity problems, which is true. They didn't mention human rights, though, which is very important for us."

¶16. (C) At least half a dozen Baghdad residents told us, without irony, that they hadn,t seen any of the proceedings because they only have electricity in their homes for one or two hours per day and almost never when they are there. One added he hadn,t had electricity while home in four days.

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Two of our interlocutors seemed incredulous at the thought of ISF, and particularly the IP, filling in the gaps that the proposed surge drawdown could create. They admitted that there had been some security improvements in Baghdad (they see fewer cadavers in the street), but emphasized that there "is no normal life for the average Baghdadi." Reduced AQI activity meant that they now faced only a heightened possibility of death, instead of certain death, if they wandered into the wrong neighborhood. They said Tehran is laying the groundwork to pursue its territorial ambitions in Iraq as soon as Coalition Forces depart.

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